

8-15-2003

## Trends. Intelligence, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Truth: A Philosophical Perspective

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### Recommended Citation

Editor (2003) "Trends. Intelligence, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Truth: A Philosophical Perspective," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 22 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol14/iss22/4>

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Title: Trends. Intelligence, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Truth: A Philosophical Perspective

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Volume: 14

Issue: 22

Date: 2003-08-15

Keywords: Bush Administration, Intelligence, Lying, WMD

Abstract: This Trends article discusses the issue of the possibility of Bush administration policymakers lying about the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. (Revision of lead IBPP Trend from July 25th, V. 14, No. 21)

Did policymakers within the Bush administration lie about the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD)? And should we be shocked, shocked, if lying did occur? Let's try and answer these questions by examining the case for lying.

Lying through disparity. Much has been made of the disparate views on the presence of Iraqi WMD between intelligence analysts and administration policymakers. Analysts largely took positions that Iraqi WMD no longer existed or that they existed but did not pose a significant threat or that there were insufficient data to take a position—itsself a position. Policymakers largely took positions that Iraqi WMD did exist and did pose a significant threat. The disparity has been taken as a smoking gun of administration lying.

Yet, for disparity to work as a smoking gun, one must accept that analysts have some privileged status to the truth. Otherwise, the disparity could favor the administration as easily as the analysts. Or the disparity could suggest that some third party has the correct view or even that no one has access to the truth or that the truth is unknowable.

So, do analysts have a privileged status to the truth? Maybe not. Analysts, like policymakers, are subject to the interrelated vagaries of sensation, perception, emotion, motivation, thought, behavior, and social and biological contexts that construct and set limits on what the truth seems to be and how it is reached. In fact, history shows us many examples wherein virtually all analysts and/or policymakers clearly supported some truth, and that truth turned out not to be the truth. Throughout history there have been culture wars among analysts, policymakers, and the implementers of policy about who has privileged status to the truth. History's best answer is that the only truth is that these culture wars have always gone on and always will.

Lying through righteousness. Much has been made of administration policymakers harboring desires to invade Iraq years before the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Rationales have included ending the Iraqi threat to United States (US) security interests, punishing the Iraqi government for its complicity in an assassination attempt on a former US president, constructing a new Mideast with democracy and free markets, reinforcing an image and reality of US global and benign superiority, and controlling oil. And these rationales are based on what we might call righteousness—i.e., they are assumed to be good. Then, a further assumption is made that—if any or all of these consequences occur pursuant to the invasion of Iraq—such an occurrence support the hypothesis of policymaker lying.

One problem with this argument is that the cause of lying (the achievement of rationales) is presumed to have occurred after its effect (lying). This turns the common notion of cause and effect on its head. A counter to this problem might be that the real cause is not the achievement of rationales but the intent

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to achieve them—with intent occurring before the lying. However, identifying intent—ultimately a thought or motivational process that one can only surmise in another based on the indirect lens of behavior—is as tenuous as the assumption that intent leads to events such as lying that logically seems to follow intent.

Lying through evil. Much has been made by opponents of the President that his administration covets and engages in the immoral and the unethical. Here, immoral and unethical frequently seem to denote going it alone in foreign policy, acting only according to business interests, and outright militaristic pleasure. The administration's opponents assume that lying is much more likely to occur in the immoral and unethical, so lying must have occurred.

However, even the most evil can tell the truth. As well, the case of the President and his administration being evil seems to rely only on not adhering to the political agenda of the opponents. Moreover, the attribution of evil machinations to authority figures—while occasionally warranted—is most often a reflection of consciously and unconsciously transferring one's own undesirable traits to such figures. All of us who have been managers, supervisors, commanders, leaders, parents, or otherwise a participant in an unequal power relationship have experienced both sides of this last phenomenon.

Lying through lack of evidence. The President and administration policymakers must have lied about the presence of Iraqi WMD, because the WMD have not been found subsequent to the invasion of Iraq.

However, some significant amount of WMD may be found. Moreover, policymakers may have sincerely believed in the presence of WMD and were just plain wrong and were not lying. This belief could be well founded on the documented development and use of WMD by the Iraqi government in the 1980s and Iraq's long-term cover, camouflage, and deception practices.

Lying—should we be shocked? So, the case for lying can be countered. And only deep in the hearts and mind and souls of the alleged liars does the truth about lying lay. But assuming lying did occur, what should our reaction be?

Our reaction will depend on the faith we have in what philosophers call moral valuation—the what and how of our beliefs about right and wrong. To some of us, lying is always wrong. To others, it depends on the intention behind the lying. To still others it depends on the consequences of lying or some combination of all the above. To even others—who can be called epistemological relativists—there is no right and wrong and the very meaning of lying has imploded. To yet others, it depends on how many other people engage in the behavior—e.g., if we all lie, can or can't it be wrong?

A conclusion. One might attack the Bush administration for offering up a number of scapegoats—the Director of Central Intelligence, some National Security Council staffer, or the President himself. One might attack the Bush administration for taking the assertion of imminent Iraqi WMD threat out of one speech in 2002 and placing it in another in 2003—from a speech in Cincinnati to the State of the Union Address. One might attack the Bush administration for outing a covert employee of the Central Intelligence Agency who is married to a critic of the administration's stance on Iraqi WMD. One might attack the Bush administration for waxing in an ironically Clintonian fashion about the technical correctness of the famous 16 words in the State of the Union Address—all stemming from what the meaning of is is. Or leaving the realm of Truth for the realm of the Good, one might attack the Bush administration for losing its way in the war against global terrorism through the smoke and mirrors of Iraq. Suffice it to say that we are all confronted with choices on the nature of truth. And these choices

can be and are used to justify one's preferred public and private views of the world and to malign those of others. These choices that we must make—for even choosing not to make a choice is a choice—say something about how we are human but do not allow us to avoid being human. There's no way to get outside these choices to somehow appraise their truthfulness in any ultimately true fashion.

The plain truth of the matter—as I hoist myself on my own truth-petard—is that the only constant of truth is not its meaning but its function. There may be many truths that are congruent and contradictory, that talk to each other but also above and below and around and through each other, that apply to the actor but also the observer, and that seem to last and seem to never even be transitory. Whole academic fields of inquiry—e.g., historiography, hermeneutics, semiotics, exegesis, cognitive psychology, and psychodynamic interpretation—are dedicated to these matters. This doesn't mean that there is no truth. It does mean that we may be confronted with a more difficult challenge than knowing what is always true. This latter challenge is knowing what is true and when.

So, in supporting or opposing the Bush administration on questions related to intelligence, WMD, and truth, we are only supporting or opposing ourselves. We all inevitably play fast and loose with the truth and with the utmost seriousness whether we know it or not. That's the truth. (See Beinart, P. (July 28/August 4, 2003). Wrongly accused. *The New Republic*, p. 6; Corn, D. (July 21/28, 2003). WMD; Who knew what? *The Nation*, pp. 6, 8; Kerr, P. (July/August 2003). Bush administration defends intelligence findings on Iraq. *Arms Control Today*. <http://www.armscontrol.org>; Knowlton, B. (July 17, 2003). Bush and Blair defend decision to wage war in Iraq. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com>; Loughlin, S. (June 4, 2003). Bush administration: Intelligence data on Iraq was not manipulated. *CNN.com*. <http://us.cnn.com>; Moore, J. (June 12, 2003). Democrats talk of WMD intelligence investigation. *RepublicanDailyNews.com*. <http://www.gopusa.com>; Sanger, D.E., & Miller, J. (July 23, 2003). National security aide says he's to blame for speech error. *The New York Times*. p. A11; Stevenson, R.W. (July 19, 2003). White House tells how Bush came to talk of Iraq uranium. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com>; The Editors. (July 28/August 4, 2003.) 16 words. *The New Republic*. P. 8.) (Keywords: Bush Administration, Intelligence, Lying, WMD.)